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ABSTRACT

When discussing "flaming" in relation to InterChange, it makes sense to look at two meanings of the word, to make the connection between the ardent and uncontrollable nature of the comments themselves and the flagrancy with which the electronic medium asserts itself. For some teachers, a "flaming" InterChange threatens their position in the classroom and challenges their authority. The idea of the classroom as a nonflammable area seems to be desirable to many an instructor, in disregard of the fire that is raging outside of the safe and privileged setting of the computer classroom. InterChange can be an empowering experience for the students as well as the teacher. Flaming sessions tend to occur when students enter under a pseudonym and abuse the fact that they are completely invisible. During one such "flame," the other students and the instructor protected themselves and their writings by indirectly excluding the flamer from the discussion. However, in a session on the exploitation of women in beer commercials, the traditional power structures were reinforced and the exchange became hostile. The instructor incorporated the transcript of the flaming session as a primary text and had the students discuss the transcript during the next InterChange session. Used as a primary text, InterChange holds a lot of potential as a teaching tool. Teachers should not extinguish the flames but burn down the walls that separate the classrooms and the outside world where flaming is a fact of life. (RS)

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# Can InterChange Write/Right Itself?

Recently I had an exchange with my mother about homosexuality. My mother, who lives in Germany near Cologne, told me on the phone one day that "that's starting here too now," meaning homosexuals were starting to assert their rights even in Germany. They were even going public on T.V. In a letter shortly after our phone conversation, she wrote that she knew "some of them" and they were actually nice people. She could, however, not understand why gays and lesbians had to be so "obnoxious" when it came to their sexual identity. "Why do they have to be so outspoken about it?" she asked me. The question is a pretty standard one. It implies that homosexuals are OK as long as they remain in the closet. My response to my mother was what it always is: Silence means we don't exist.

I'm not sure there is a German equivalent for "flaming." If there were my mother might be inclined to use it – after all it refers to homosexuals who are **too much**, who draw attention to their homosexuality in ways that are threatening to those who don't want to or cannot acknowledge that there is such a thing as a homosexual, or who, like my mother, can

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live with the idea of homosexuality, but not (yet) with its reality.

I found that teachers and researchers are also inclined to use the word "flaming" when they refer to sessions that have, in the instructor's opinion, gotten out of hand. In this context "flaming" has come to mean a certain type of student behavior that "can include," according to Gail Hawisher (1992) "impoliteness, swearing, charged outbursts, and often a high use of superlatives" (p. 91). "Flaming" is used here in the sense of "intensely emotional," "ardent" or "passionate" not in the sense of "flagrant" or "blatant" as my mother might use it. When we talk about "flaming" in relation to InterChange, however, it makes sense to look at both meanings of the word, to make the connection between the ardent and uncontrollable nature of the comments themselves and the flagrancy with which the electronic medium asserts itself.

The fear of fire is significant because in talking about ways to deal with it, the extinction of the fire often takes precedence over issues of the fear itself. But who is afraid and of what? Who do we want to protect from blisters? Our students or ourselves?

A successful session would be a session where student interaction and the task at hand are foregrounded and not problematized by the medium. A "flaming" InterChange, on the other hand, threatens our position in the classroom and challenges the authority of the teacher because the

electronic medium disrupts the patterns and routines of responses we have established for ourselves or aspire to. That is especially the case when a session catches fire. Laurie George's article "Taking Women Professors Seriously: Female Authority in the Computerized Classroom" (1990) speaks to that fear. George doesn't use the term "flaming," but defines what she calls "interinsultive exchanges" as "wilding around" (p. 49). Her article demonstrates well, however, the ways in which electronic medium and student responses are interrelated. Some theorists and researchers have carved out for her the role of the "resource person/facilitator/ nurturing mother figure" (p. 48), a role that is jeopardized, as George observes in dismay (pp. 48-49), by the fact "that the students in her technological college are predominantly male and that many have taken to heart the cultural stereotype of themselves as brash New Yorkers" and "the particular tension a given male student could be experiencing with his mother, girlfriend, or women in general." I do not want to comment on the essentialism inherent in the image of the female teacher as a "nurturing mother figure," nor do I want to dismiss George's concerns about the difficulties she experiences as a woman in the classroom. I think that George herself is aware that her dilemma is indeed derived from the fact that she is expected to comply with a certain image of a female teacher that is just as much a cultural construction as the image her students have of themselves, and therefore just as disturbing.

I do, however, want to focus on the rigidity with which we perceive the role we play in the classroom and the need to want to define that role once and for all. This rigidity is problematic because it reinforces the hierarchical structures that have for so long determined the relationships between teachers and students. We expect everybody to know at all times who the teacher is and who the student, a distinction that is largely erased on the InterChange screen. Furthermore, we seem to expect that we are accommodated by our students in whatever role we choose for ourselves. Thus the role of the "nurturing mother figure" is only possible in an environment that, strictly speaking, is nurturing to us.

The idea of the classroom as a nonflammable area seems to be desirable to many an instructor, in disregard of the fire that is raging outside of the safe and privileged setting of the computer classroom with its plush seats and private work spaces. In order not to get burned, Laurie George uses "[her] authority in ways that do not fit nicely with notions of nurturance and that indeed could be criticized as less feminist than masculist" (p. 50). Colleagues of mine have put down ground rules for InterChange sessions that forbid language that could spark the fire, that prescribe patterns of courteous and inoffensive interaction. Violations of the rules may result in no InterChange at all or in expulsion. One of my students pointed out that "Last year [when we used InterChange for the first time] half of the class got kicked

out because it got way out of hand. Everybody just said what they felt and maybe a little bit too much."

I myself have fallen prey to those fears. In fact, I've had nightmares in which all my attempts to nurture, to care and to teach in the computer classroom were utterly ignored by the objects of my teacherly desire. But after having read my students' mid-semester evaluations one semester, in which some of them commented on the positive aspects of InterChange, I realized that I had to rethink my position in the classroom if I wanted to keep up with my students. One female student, for example, wrote that "InterChange is an easier way of talking about things because it leaves the feeling 'that everyone is looking at me and I'm afraid I'll say something stupid' out." This comment echoes one of Lester Faigley's students (1990), also a woman, who observed that "you are not put on the spot by having everyone look at you when you speak" (p. 307). In a recent InterChange on mixed media , one of my female students said she liked InterChange because "we can all say what we want whenever we want, there are no interruptions or more than one person talking." Another woman added that "I think this is better than telephone because no one can interrupt you."

I think that the fear that "everyone is looking at me" or that "I'll say something stupid" is characteristic of many students, especially women and students whose native language is not English. InterChange protects them from the gaze of the class, and in my experience students who would not speak

during a class discussion, do write. On the screen, the power structures and hierarchies that tend to dominate the traditional classroom are likely to break down. Everybody is equal, men and women; teacher and students. I am only a name on the screen, like everybody else. The screen takes the place of the other in a conversation or discussion, and the attention is not focused on the teacher. I have another quote from one of my students who, when she was asked whether she was brownnosing the teacher, responded: "[No] my nose isn't brown and when did I agree with the teacher? Aren't we all equals here?" Many have discussed the advantages of InterChange in this vein. I want to emphasize the lack of the gaze that is intrinsic to the electronic medium. This lack of the gaze works to our advantage since much of the construction of the role we play in the classroom is determined by our students' gaze – and vice versa. As a colleague of mine observed during a conversation, InterChange is an empowering experience, for the students as well as for the teacher. The pressure of having to perform is taken off our shoulders. To accept that empowerment and to redefine my role over and over has been the goal of my teaching, especially in flaming situations.

Because of the ability to disguise oneself, to assume another identity, so-called flaming sessions tend to occur when students come in under a pseudonym and abuse the fact they are completely invisible. In a conventional class discussion – in which people must be accountable for not only

their words, but also for their gestures and facial expressions – this kind of disguise would be impossible. Ironically I have never witnessed this in a shy student who actually wanted to hide behind a mask. It's students who are self-confident – maybe overly so – who will give the others a piece of their minds without identifying themselves. A former student of mine, Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lector [sic], for example, who takes his name from the tongue-eating monster-psychiatrist in *The Silence of the Lambs*, thinks that his ideas and his ways of expressing them are superior. He dominates the screen, too – his comments are the longest ones and elicit responses like "Hannibal, you have already made an essay with all this writing!"

Even though Lector voiced some good ideas about writing and, in his own way tried to be reassuring, he scared and alienated some of his peers – notably women – with the extremity of his views. Students told him how they felt about his advice to "pick the most warped idea in the back of your tiny skulls" and to "let your blood flow on the keyboard." At first, many students acknowledged Lector's comments and addressed him directly. Toward the end of the session, however, their comments were increasingly directed toward each other, or to nobody in particular, while the content changed. Not Lector's contributions, but Lector himself became the subject. The culmination of this exchange was the following comment in which the student turned, in a mock gesture, to me as the "authority figure" in the

classroom and asked: "Who keeps inviting all these people? I want to know where Hannibal seats down [sic]? Can we keep him Sabine? He could be our psychologist?" Lector was reduced to the status of a pet, or a class mascot; he ceased to be the tongue-eating monster.

The reason I am telling you this story is to show you the complex dynamics of an InterChange session, and how it writes itself without major interference on my part. I picked up on some things Lector said and turned them around, pointing out positive features in his peers' writings. I addressed his peers' concerns and their ideas directly, rather than trying to squelch Lector. The students protected themselves and their writings by indirectly excluding Lector from their discussion. In a way we all conspired in his exclusion, without any harm done to Lector and I think we were successful in our attempt to talk constructively about problems of writing after all. We saved our tongues, so to speak.

There are instances, however, when InterChange does not write itself, when traditional power structures are reinforced and when the exchange becomes hostile. This happened during a session which focused on the exploitation of women in beer commercials. Feelings of hostility were carried over from a previous discussion on the floor about date rape (the topic one woman chose for her documented essay), and fueled by the discussion of beer ads. While women were seriously discussing the topic at hand, some of

the men tried to make the most vocal ones of their female peers commit to dates with them, while claiming their own oppression. Here's an example. Heather responds to Peter's comment that "men are exploited too": "Peter, please enlighten me on an instance where men are exploited." Julie, also in response to Peter, states her disbelief of male exploitation since "this world is run by white males." Kristen, in the meantime, describes an ad for a menstrual pain reliever as an example for "the way that women are thought of in society." Camel Joe, whose real name – unlike Lector's – is known to the class, purposefully misunderstands Heather's comment as jealousy without even remotely referring to the content of either Heather's or Kristen's contributions. "HEATHER: no need to be jealous. You're beautiful too. We'll go out tomorrow night." Tonight, he tells us, is already reserved for Maureen, "the most beautiful woman I've seen in my 19 years on earth." The men dismissed the comments made by their female peers while the women became more and more frustrated because all their attempts to discuss the issue in a meaningful way were sabotaged. The men's refusal to listen and to take their female peers seriously reinforced what the women said about sexism in beer commercials. The last comment of that session was: "CONGRATULATIONS MEN IN THIS CLASS. I NOW THINK YOU ARE ALL DISGUSTING PIGS. WITH A FEW EXCEPTIONS."

Matters seemed to be pretty out of hand – my hand. I was oscillating between several possibilities of dealing with the

situation: the authoritative approach of cutting them off and ending the interinsultive exchange; the moderating approach of plugging myself into the discussion to soothe the exited spirits and draw attention to the bad way the discussion was going; the teacher-interference approach of telling them to stop offending each other and to get back to the issues at hand. Neither seemed particularly appropriate at the time, so I decided to sit it out for the moment and to take advantage of InterChange's most intriguing feature, the fact that it is not lost, like an oral conversation, once everybody is logged out. I presented my students with the transcript of their exchange the next class. I got the idea from a colleague of mine who used this tactic to extinguish the flames, by having her students agree on certain do's and don'ts of InterChange in order to avoid the repetition of a flaming session. I decided on a different strategy, which is to incorporate the transcript into the curriculum as a primary text. Not the beer commercials themselves were the topic anymore, but the students' discussion of beer commercials, the "flaming" itself. The idea was to have students read their own exchange like they would a book or a newspaper article, and to exchange their readings of it on another InterChange session. The task was not to blame, but to read, to look closely at patterns of language that do not burst out in the vacuum of a classroom, but are part of all our lives as soon as we leave what we have declared the nonflammable zone.

On this second InterChange not everything got resolved, naturally, but people **were** able to talk to each other. Some students tried to blame and were stopped by others. When I re-read the meta-InterChange, I was surprised how individual students did pick up on what was going on much more than I had been aware of at the time of the actual InterChange session. They were able to trace the initial comments back to their floor discussion, and pointed out the paradox of "trying to get the point across...that women are people of depth and worth, unlike they are portrayed in ad's, [while] the whole time PETER WAS TRYING TO GET A DATE WITH HER!!!!!!!"

I think that used in this way – as a primary text – InterChange holds a lot of potential as a teaching tool. I also think that it is necessary for InterChange to be effective that way, that it burns, that people react to each other the way they would normally react. I suggest not to extinguish the flames, but to burn down the walls that separate our classrooms from the world outside where "flaming" is a fact of life. And I suggest to make the technology of InterChange, its "flaming" quality, the topic of our exchanges, to bring the medium out of the closet. We as teachers have to overcome our fear of being burned in order to make it possible for our students and ourselves to control the fire that otherwise threatens to consume us.

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